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Dog Tips

One of the Nastiest Parasites That Could Latch Onto Your Dog

These little bloodsuckers are out of control in most areas of the US, and claiming more territory all the time. They can make your dog deathly ill with far-reaching symptoms. Fortunately, there are 5 ways to pull the rug out from under these awful critters.

Analysis by Dr. Karen Shaw Becker

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Tick season has arrived across most of the U.S., and tick-borne diseases are reaching epidemic proportions
- Ticks are steadily expanding their geographic territory, and growing more resistant to chemical pesticides
- A single tick can harbor multiple infectious organisms
- Tick-borne diseases commonly seen in dogs include anaplasmosis, babesiosis, ehrlichiosis, Lyme and Rocky Mountain spotted fever
- Best prevention tip: check your dog at least once daily for ticks, and do regular blood tests to check for silent tick-borne infections

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Tick season is either already here or headed your way if you live where the little bloodsuckers thrive during the warmer months of the year. Tick-borne diseases are reaching epidemic proportions across the U.S. The parasites are constantly expanding their territory, while also becoming increasingly resistant to many pesticides.

In addition, one tick bite can transmit multiple tick-borne diseases. Ticks pick up pathogens from infected wildlife. In the case of Lyme disease and babesiosis, mice and chipmunks are the primary reservoirs. Ticks that attach to these animals are much more likely to be co-infected.[1]

Some ticks can even be infected with three pathogens, including Lyme, babesiosis and anaplasmosis. Following are five of the most prevalent tick-borne diseases in dogs, followed by five tips on how to keep your own canine family member safe and healthy during tick season.

5 Commonly Diagnosed Tick-Borne Infections in Dogs

1. **Anaplasmosis —** This tick-borne infection is caused by the bacteria Anaplasma phagocytophilum or Anaplasma platys. The infection is transmitted by the deer tick or the brown dog tick, both of which are found throughout the U.S.

   Infected dogs can run a high fever, lose their appetite, have vomiting and diarrhea, neck pain, neurologic signs, anemia and even seizures. If your dog tests positive for anaplasmosis but doesn't have anemia or other

symptoms, chances are he has effectively cleared the bacteria on his own. Antibiotics are used to treat more serious, confirmed infections.

2. **Babesiosis —** Most cases of **babesiosis** in dogs occur in the southern part of the U.S., with pockets of disease also reported in the northeast. Babesiosis is caused by the intracellular parasite Babesia, and the incubation period between exposure and symptoms is about two weeks.

   Symptoms, when present, can range from mild to very severe and can include lack of energy, lack of appetite, weakness, fever, pale gums and tongue, orange or red-colored urine, discolored stool, weight loss, enlarged lymph nodes, enlarged spleen and jaundice. A severe infection can affect multiple organ systems including the lungs, gastrointestinal (GI) tract, kidneys and nervous system.

3. **Ehrlichiosis —** Canine ehrlichiosis is caused by two bacteria: Ehrlichia canis is transmitted by the brown dog tick and is commonly found in the southwest and Gulf Coast states; Ehrlichia ewingii is transmitted by the lone star tick and is found from the Midwest to New England.

   Like other tick-borne diseases, ehrlichia can wreak havoc on your dog's body if it's not identified and treated. Symptoms include loss of appetite, low-grade fever, lethargy, swollen lymph nodes and occasionally, unexplained bruising, lameness and nosebleeds.

   Just because a dog tests positive on the initial screening test for ehrlichiosis doesn't mean she must immediately be treated. In fact, most dogs successfully clear the infection without medical intervention. For this reason, I don't recommend automatically giving antibiotics to positive dogs.

   If your pet tests positive, ask your vet to do additional testing to find out whether she has just been exposed or is actually dealing with an infection.

4. **Lyme disease —** Lyme disease, also known as borreliosis, is caused by Borrelia burgdorferi bacteria. B. burgdorferi is carried by two types of ticks: the common deer tick in the northeast and upper Midwest, and the western black-legged tick in the western U.S. Many dogs infected with B. burgdorferi show no symptoms at all, and presence of the bacteria is only detected through routine tests at a veterinary clinic.

   If your dog develops symptoms, they will usually appear from two to five months after the tick bite and can include fever, swollen lymph nodes, joint swelling, lameness, lethargy and loss of appetite. This is why I recommend screening for this disease twice a year in endemic areas before dogs become symptomatic.

   As with other tick-borne infections, many dogs successfully clear Lyme infections on their own. If your dog tests positive on a screening test, I don't recommend automatically giving antibiotics. Instead, ask your vet to make sure your dog is truly infected by running a follow-up test called a Quantitative C6 (QC6) test.

5. **Rocky Mountain spotted fever —** This tick-borne infection caused by the Rickettsia rickettsii organism is seen most often in the eastern U.S., the Midwest and the plains region. The disease is transmitted by the American dog tick and the lone star tick. An infected tick must be attached to your dog for at least five hours for transmission to occur.

   Symptoms of Rocky Mountain spotted fever can include fever, reduced appetite, depression, joint pain, lameness, vomiting, and diarrhea. More serious symptoms include heart abnormalities, pneumonia, kidney and liver damage and neurological signs. Fortunately, when caught early, the disease is entirely treatable.

5 Tips to Help Your Dog Avoid a Tick-Borne Infection

1. **Check for ticks daily —** And don't overlook areas of your pet's body where ticks can hide, like between the toes, the underside of the toes, in the earflaps and around the tail base. That's why daily tick checks, or even better, tick checks each time your dog has been outside and potentially exposed, and removing ticks immediately are crucially important steps in reducing your dog's risk of acquiring an infection.
2. **Use natural tick deterrents —** There are dozens on the market, and although none of them can prevent 100% of tick bites, 100% of the time, they may make your dog a less appealing host.
3. **Focus on making your dog optimally healthy —** Ticks and other parasites prefer weaker hosts. Creating a strong and resilient immune system in your dog through a nutritionally balanced, fresh food diet, titering and minimizing chemical exposure will make her less attractive to ticks.
4. **Remove ticks the right way —** If you find a tick on your dog, be sure to remove it immediately, but carefully. Don't use your bare hands because you risk becoming infected by handling or crushing an infected tick. Wear gloves, or even better, use a tick-removing tool.

   Grasp the tick very close to your pet's skin with a tick removal tool or a pair of tweezers. Carefully pull the tick's body away from the skin. Once it's off, flush it down the toilet. Then disinfect your dog's skin with soapy water or diluted povidone iodine (Betadine). I also recommend applying a drop of lavender oil to the bite. Monitor the attachment site for the next few days. If you notice any irritation or inflammation of the skin, contact your veterinarian.
5. **Have your dog tested for tick-borne diseases —** Do this three to four weeks after removing a tick (no sooner than three weeks). Ask your vet for the SNAP 4Dx or Accuplex4 test, which are screening blood tests. If you don't have one of these tests done, you'll need to watch your dog closely for several months for any signs of loss of appetite, lethargy, change in gait, fever, intermittent limping — all the symptoms of potential tick-borne disease.

   And keep in mind that waiting until your dog exhibits symptoms isn't the most proactive approach. I have found tick-borne diseases substantially harder to treat once a dog is clearly ill. The period of subclinical infection (when the dog has no symptoms) is when integrative practitioners see excellent treatment success.

Checking your dog externally for ticks plus having his blood checked regularly (I recommend every six months) for silent infections is the very best approach to keeping him safe from potentially devastating tick-borne diseases.

Sources and References

PetMD

[1] PLOS One, June 18, 2014